

BELMONT WARRANT COMMITTEE FY08 MEETING MINUTES  
FINAL  
OCTOBER 1, 2008, 7:30 P.M.  
CHENERY MIDDLE SCHOOL COMMUNITY ROOM

Present: Chair Curtis; Members Brusch, Callanan, Epstein, Heigham, Hofmann, Jones, Libenson, Lynch, McLaughlin, Paolillo, Smith; BOS Chair Firenze, School Committee Chair Bowe

School Committee members: Gibson, Graham, Rittenburg, Walker, Vose, and Superintendent Aubin, Assistant Superintendent Fitzpatrick, Director of Finance Missal

Town Accountant Hagg, Town Administrator Younger, Assistant Town Administrator Conti  
Selectman Leclerc

Absent: WC Members Allison and Widmer

The meeting was called to order at 7:32 pm by Chair Curtis.  
The BOS and SC were also called to order at 7:32 pm by Chair Firenze and Chair Bowe, respectively.

Chair Curtis began the meeting by noting that it was SC Chair Bowe who first suggested the joint meeting idea. The three bodies here tonight share the common goal of presenting a budget in April. Before delving into the budget, Curtis continued, Town Administrator Younger is going to discuss comments made by citizens who attended the June 23rd post-roads-override public forum meeting.

#### Discussion of Resident Concerns as Expressed at Public Forum

Town Administrator Younger: About 50 citizens and various town officials were present at this forum, including department heads. For most points raised, there was no follow-up discussion. A number of individuals said that they want the town run like a business. They also want transparency for both the town and school, and they feel a lack of trust in how money is spent. The one issue raised and addressed (by BOS Chair Firenze) concerned the Kendall insurance funds.

BOS Chair Firenze: There is a lack of confidence in the way the town is run. Residents draw conclusions (sometimes incorrectly) from little bits of information. They are quick to jump to the conclusion that the town is mismanaged. Chair Curtis asked: What does greater transparency mean? Firenze: People want to understand the process that led to decisions and they want more information on the budget. We live with the budget process for 6 or 7 months, but it is not presented in a way that is easy to comprehend. Curtis: Perhaps we could make more information available earlier in the process - what else can we do? Member Epstein: It is unreasonable for people to come in (i.e., in May) and expect to know what has been worked through all year. If they are serious about understanding the process, they should participate early and often. Member Jones: This town is far more transparent when compared to the state and federal processes. Member McLaughlin expressed frustration by the process of a "fixed sum being divided among people who aren't getting enough."

SC member Walker suggested putting out fact sheets to educate the public. Simple and clear sheets disseminated along the way may help people feel included and better informed. Member Paolillo noted that the formerly-held "precinct meetings" would be helpful to educate the public about the budget process. Chair Curtis agreed that there is a need to inform the public earlier and with more detail. He suggested that it might be useful to have a WC section on the town web site with handouts and fact sheets, etc.

Member Lynch asked how Belmont compared to other towns on the transparency issue. Town Administrator Younger said that Belmont's process is more transparent than that of other towns most for the following reasons: the WC meets more often than most finance committees, the meetings are televised, and the town's accountant and treasurer are present at the meetings.

BOS Chair Firenze noted that the "irritants" become the whole budget from the public's perspective (e.g., benefits, salaries). Dealing with the realities of what it takes to change those irritants, however, is not well known. Chair Curtis: There are some irritants we can't do anything about and some we have the power to impact and should do something about. School/town consolidation is something that people expect us to do something about.

#### FY10 Budget

##### a) How Are the Schools and Town Planning to Meet the Non-Override Budget?

SC Chair Bowe: The SC is faced with making very tough decisions. For example, what is more important, class size or after school athletic programs? - or should we degrade all services across the board or lop off entire programs (like athletics and music, for example). The \$2M shortfall could result in 30 teachers being cut. Dr. Missal added that 3 budgets are being worked on: the superintendent's recommended budget, the bottom line level service budget, and then the available revenue budget. Relevant information has a time dimension, he added - we know things later in the Spring that we don't now (e.g. winter costs, staff turn over, out of district tuition, etc.)

Selectman Leclerc requested that the school make its proposed cuts known early, so parents are aware of what could be lost - before June. Dr. Missal replied that they are starting the process by looking at what is required by the state and what is optional. SC Member Rittenburg added that in addition to learning the specific mandates, the SC has begun a conversation with residents in how to best make reductions to meet the available revenue. We want to get the information out early so they will know what's at stake and can have some input into the process, she said.

Town Administrator Younger has met with department heads and has requested that they prepare three budgets which are due early November. The first budget is "level services," the second is an "available funds" budget, and the third is a "5% reduction" budget (5% below available funds, which will address shortfalls). Younger said he is concerned about the impact of Ballot Question 1, which, if it passes, will cause more reductions. The Governor is looking at cuts and, should local aid get reduced, Younger continued, the FY10 budget will be impacted. Member Callanan noted that the members of the SC are committed to meeting more often with the WC Education Subcommittee. SC member Rittenburg asked if the WC Education Subcommittee would attend SC meetings when finances (budget) are expected to be reviewed. It would make the process more transparent, she said. Member Bruschi said she is open to that suggestion.

##### b) Discussion of Possible Override Scenarios

Chair Curtis: One override scenario would be to compare the "level service" budget to the actual available revenue, and that's the override number: i.e., \$4M. We could also do a "tiered" or "segmented" override - with some funds for the town or money that only goes to schools. Member McLaughlin said that the smaller the override number, the greater the likelihood it would get passed. Member Bruschi: We could consider the Arlington approach, in which they did an override and promised that they would not come back for another override for 6 years. Bruschi added that this has proved problematic for the school side. SC Chair Bowe asked what the timeline would look like for when override decisions would be made by the BOS. BOS Chair Firenze replied "later." Chair Curtis noted that, by addressing consolidation, we may generate

additional override support. Member Hofmann suggested we look to see how Needham successfully managed the consolidation process.

#### c) Other Budget Issues

Member Heigham suggested that the WC/BOS/SC go on record to say that, "if no override passes, layoffs will be inevitable." Member Bruschi suggested the addition: "- or a reduction in services/programs is inevitable." Superintendent Aubin noted that a reduction in services/programs would lead to layoffs (program staff is not necessarily transferable, for one thing, and typical staff attrition alone would not be able to account for staff reductions needed if no override succeeds).

#### FY09 Budget: How Do We Deal with Revenue Shortfalls/Faulty Budgeting?

Chair Curtis: Regarding unbudgeted fuel cost increases, the WC opted to have this dealt with within the existing budgets. Since streetlight savings won't be achieved, this is a problem the town will have to deal with. We will not deviate from course, from FY09 assumptions, Curtis said. BOS Chair Firenze noted that if we don't cut the lights now to save money, we may shut all the lights off when the money runs out. Or go to TM to request more money. Member Jones added that there is no state mandate to keep the lights on.

#### Warrant Committee Meeting Calendar and Important Dates for Other Committees

Chair Curtis provided a handout of upcoming WC meetings and reviewed important dates:

- " December 10: Budget Presentations
- " January 21: Community Budget Forum

#### Senior Center Update

This topic will be deferred to another WC meeting.

#### Other

The actuary report will be presented at a future BOS meeting.

Member Heigham moved that the WC adjourn at 9:30 pm.  
SC Chair Bowe adjourned the SC meeting at 9:30 pm.  
BOS Chair Firenze stated the BOS was still in session.

Submitted by Lisa Gibalerio  
WC Recording Secretary